The Fourth Church Pulpit

A Lenten Series:
Love to the Loveless
That They Might Lovely Be

A MAN WAITING FOR LIFE

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FOURTH
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Scripture: John 5:1-9

"When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'"
John 5:6(NRSV)

That astute observer of the human condition, Mike Ditka, often observes that "Sports are like life." Sometime it's true. One of the great moments in American sports happened on January 1, 1954, during the Cotton Bowl Game between Rice and the University of Alabama. Rice All-American halfback, Dicky Moegel, took a hand-off at the Alabama five yard line and headed up the sideline. The play worked perfectly, as happens occasionally, and by mid-field, he was, as they say, in the clear. No Alabama player on the field was going to catch him. But as he raced down field, along the sideline, that is, directly in front of the Alabama bench, a player who was not in the game at the moment, Tommy Lewis, and who could have been any one of these nameless players who sit on the bench during the game, who work very hard and wait and wait and wait for an opportunity to step onto the playing field, into the spotlight and finally become a participant and no longer an observer, Tommy Lewis decided to act. He jumped up from the bench, took two steps onto the playing field, and to the absolute shock of the spectators, his teammates, not to mention Dicky Moegel, and maybe even to himself, made a clean and decisive tackle.

It was a moment. It is not, please understand, offered today as a model for how to conduct ourselves in competitive business situations, disregarding the very basic rules of the game and taking matters literally in hand. By the way, there was no penalty for this unprecedented infraction because there is no rule against entering the game on impulse. Rice was awarded the touchdown and won the game 28-6. Everyone knows that the game itself cannot be played if the basic rules are not upheld. It was, nevertheless, a moment, because I think everyone understands a little of the dynamic and everyone has at one time or another wanted to do something like that: jump up from the bench and into the game - dramatically becoming a player instead of an observer. And it has always attached itself in my mind to a famous incident in the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to John.

I really like this man . . . one of the unforgettable characters in the Fourth Gospel who are so authentically human. The reader somehow knows that this is not character fiction; this is history, an intuition more and more corroborated by scholarship. Time was when Biblical scholars said we should put the objective history of Jesus together by looking at Matthew, Mark and Luke and regard John as a kind of metaphor: a specific arrangement of materials in order to make a point. John, we were taught, is not history. But now, archeology keeps uncovering all the places John uses — like the huge pool by the sheep gate in this story. It has been found, excavated. It is like John describes it. It's big, trapezoidal in configuration: it has porches around it and it apparently was fed by an intermittent spring which would have caused the surface water to bubble mysteriously. It also has steps in each corner — obviously people got down into the water on occasion. So we are paying new and careful attention to the material John presents in case it is the earliest and perhaps very reliable accounting of how it really was with Jesus.

In any event, I like this man because I recognize him— in myself and in others and I know about the dynamic which is operating in this story. One of the people who had a major impact on my life was a no-nonsense college professor who read my freshman paper on some technical dimension of American Constitutional Law for which I had done almost no work, relying on my ability to get by on confidence and fancy rhetorical footwork. He wrote, on the last page, in blue felt-tip pen, just below the "F": "Mr. Buchanan, you are sitting on the curb, watching the parade go by."

So I learned that life was demanding and that I had a decision to make. I learned that survival in that new place, viable life, depended on something in me beyond my inherited gifts, something in my heart, or spirit, something like commitment, sacrifice, caring, love, if you will. It's a great lesson to learn.

"Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be" is the theme this Lent. And it is what happens to these wonderful people in the Fourth Gospel. Nicodemus, the woman at the well, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene: each touched by God's love in Jesus Christ: converted by that love, given new life: reborn, in a radically inclusive and holy love that accepted, embraced, understood them, took them seriously and in each case, made them lovely.

Not an easy task with this one. He is not very lovely. In fact, he's unattractive, the way I read it. Familiar, but unattractive.

He's been sick for thirty-eight years. We find him lying on his mat beside the pool of Bethzatha, or Bethsaida, because the tradition is that an angel of the Lord comes and troubles the waters, and when the water is bubbling, whoever is first into it will be cured miraculously of whatever is wrong with him or her. So we have a scene here of some pathos. Around the pool are some very needy people . . . blind, lame, paralyzed. We never know what this man's particular problem is, only that he's there by the pool, has been there for a long time, and, he tells Jesus, never quite makes it into the water on time. Someone, it seems, always pushes in ahead of him.

Raymond E. Brown, the scholarly expert on the Fourth Gospel observes that this man would be funny if he weren't so pathetic. Thirty-eight years he has been there — getting beaten every time to the pool. "No one will help me," he explains.

I don't think he's alone, however. I think there is a group of them. I think they gather every day and sit in the sun together. I think they complain about their aches and pains, about how tough it is, about those outsiders who come in here and beat us to the pool, about the government and the morals of the younger generation and the weather. I think they have a great time and I don't think he's the slightest bit interested in change. The other vignette that has attached itself to this story in my mind is a story I know I have told before and I can't remember when — but it's worth repeating. My father told it and swore it was true. He worked on the railroad, on an engine once with a man who complained every day about his lunch. Every day he would open his lunch pail, unwrap his sandwich and say,

> "Bologna sandwiches. I hate them! I can't stand bologna sandwiches. I wish I had some other kind of sandwich to eat."

Once, after hearing this sorry lament hundreds of times, my father said,

> "If you don't like bologna, why don't you say something to your wife. Perhaps she would make a different kind of sandwich for you."

His partner became indignant, Dad said.

> "What do you mean, say something to my wife? I make my own lunch!"

Sometimes the point is not change, but complaining, the unique joy of being a victim, and thereby not having to be responsible for one's own spiritual and emotional and physical status.

Wendy Kaminer, an acerbic commentator on the contemporary scene, has written a not altogether tongue-in-cheek critique of what she calls "the cult of the victim" . . . and a culture that is putting all its energies into victimization, entitled *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional.* Kaminer thinks there is something mean-spirited about the whole thing.

> "For all the talk about caring and sharing, it (the cult of victimization) is an excuse for people not to have any compassion. The payoff of claiming that you are a victim is that you always get to put your own problems first. It even has a new name. 'Compassion fatigue' and it sounds like this. 'I'm tired of hearing about the homeless. I'm tired of hearing about poor children. I'm tired of hearing about the minorities. I have problems too. My father wasn't nice to me.' It's as if people are saying, 'me too, me too.' Everyone is vying for the crown of thorns." [from an interview in "The Door," reprinted in *Context,* M. E. Marty, 3/15/93]

We can't know for sure, but I think that's what is going on here. The man is sick, but we don't know with what. He's been sick for thirty-eight years: he can't make it into the pool and the sense of it is that he really doesn't want to make it, doesn't want to be whole and well and alive; has resigned himself to the status quo; is a perpetual victim and frankly, rather likes it this way.

Are there not echoes of familiarity here? Do we not invest heavily in waiting for the future to arrive when someone will show up to carry us to the pool: when something happens and we will finally be all that we can be: successful, happy, well-adjusted, our checkbook balanced, file drawers neat, and photographs all organized in albums by the year?

Think of how much of our lives we invest in anticipating. We wait to be sixteen to drive, twenty-one to drink, and vote. We wait for another job, another relationship, another vacation, another experience, the big promotion, and our waiting takes on almost theological dimension because, always, there are excuses, good, sound reasons, why whatever it is we are waiting for remains out of reach.

Ministers are notorious, someone wrote, for living life on the verge.

> "Someday, when I have a church with more leaders, more young people, a bigger budget, a new secretary, someday I'll put it all together and be faithful and effective, but I can't do it now." [See James Dittes, *Minister On The Spot,* p. 1-22]

And it is not only clergy. The dynamic touches all.

> "Someday I'll put it together. Someday I'll spend more time with my family, or read more books, or lose ten pounds, or stop doing unhealthy things, or break off a destructive relationship. But I can't do it now.
>
> "Someday, I'll open the windows of my spirit and pray more and live in relationship with God and experience God's love in the community of believers, but I can't just now; it will have to wait.
>
> "Someday I'll deal with some things in my own life, my own dependency, my own addiction. Someday I'm going to stop being abusive — or stop drinking or smoking. Someday I'll make an appointment with a doctor, a marriage counselor, a therapist, a minister. Someday I'm going to deal with this . . . but not now."

And Jesus said, "Do you want to be made well?" What kind of question is that? The man had been lying there beside the healing pool for thirty-eight years. Of course he wanted to be well. Jesus violates common courtesy and every cannon of professional and political correctness by seeing and cutting through all the phony ritualized behavior, all the whining and complaining, all the excuses; looks the man in the eye and says, "Do you want to be whole?" If so, "Take up your bed and walk." Do you want to change? If so, change. Now. Today. "Pick it up and walk." And that's what the man did. To his everlasting credit the man decided to risk everything; he hadn't walked on his own for years. He hadn't had to provide for himself; there were plenty of alms given at the pool and people left food and used clothing. He had the power in himself to change his behavior. Jesus somehow saw that in him. Spoke to it. And the man walked.

In a newsletter on "Health & Healing," Dr. Julian Whitaker cites a recent Purdue University survey on the relationship of religion and health. The Purdue researcher concludes that religion is good for your health. Active participants in religious institutions and activities are significantly healthier than the rest of the population and the higher the level of participation, the healthier the participant. So when a minister from this church asks you to do a job around here, we're really doing you a big favor.

Being good objective scientists the Purdue researchers asked "Why," and proposed several answers:

- religious people tend to avoid unhealthy excessive behavior,
- religious activity provides a network for coping and support which is unique,
- religion adds an element of hope to suffering,

and then this provocative observation:

> "Faith activates a special meaning and value system to help us make sense of our lives." [*Health and Healing, Tomorrow's Medicine Today,* February 1993]

I think what Jesus really asked the man when he said, "Do you want to be well?" was, "Do you value the meaning of your own life enough to start living it? Do you love your own life enough to be whole and well and alive?" Soren Kierkegaard, 19th century Danish mystic, philosopher and theologian, wrote a book, *Works of Love,* in which he said,

> "The task is not to find the lovable object, but to find the object already given for us to love." [p. 158]

So I think what Jesus was asking was something like this. Do you appreciate the magnificent and mysterious fact of your own existence enough to want to live it fully, to use all your gifts? Do you value your life enough to open it to others and extend yourself into the lives of others? Do you, in Erich Fromm's terms, want to transcend your aches and pains and the thousand and one excuses for remaining captive to the status quo, and do something magnificent like stand up and walk, or love another human being, give your life to some good and noble cause?

There is a postscript. It's the Sabbath. The man is walking down the street of Jerusalem on his own for the first time in about four decades and he encounters some people on their way to church. They're carrying their Bibles to church on Sunday morning. They see the man carrying his mat and they say:

> "You can't do that! It's the Sabbath. It's not lawful to carry mats on the Sabbath. It says so right here, chapter 24, verse 10. Who told you you could ignore the rules of our religion, the clear prohibition of scripture? Who is this modernist, this liberal, who is willing to abrogate the traditional morality of our people? Who is this who is willing to break the commonly accepted, culturally approved and religiously orthodox definition of morality in order that this man might live his life fully and gloriously?"

Raymond Brown says this is the real point of the story . . . well-meaning, conservative, traditional religionists, becoming very exercised over the breaking of the rules and missing an incredible sight — a life touched by love and suddenly, magnificently alive.

Jesus and the man, walking for the first time, carrying his mat, meet again. Jesus says a peculiar thing to him:

> "See, you have been made well. Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you."

Now there has been a lot of scholarly discussion about that "sin no more" business. In the first place, we don't know what it means. He is not an attractive figure but he wasn't a bad man. And if he had been lying on that mat for thirty-eight years, the range of possibilities as far as sin goes had been fairly limited. Unless — and this would be very bold if Jesus meant it this way — unless the sin had something to do with lying on the mat for thirty-eight years. Could it be that Jesus was saying that the man's sin was in so devaluing the meaning of his own life that he was willing to waste it lying on a mat? Could it be that Jesus Christ calls us, individually and particularly, away from resignation to the status quo, and loves us into caring about and loving our own lives enough to stand up and walk?

Could it be that what this is all about is Jesus the Christ, God's love incarnate, love to the loveless that they might lovely be?

Could it be that Jesus Christ simply wants you to know that you are loved, wherever and whoever you are, whatever mat you are lying on or carrying; that your life is valuable enough to have to receive his attention, his presence, his command? Could it possibly be that Jesus Christ comes to each of us and says something like, "I love you and I want you to stand up and walk"?

My good friend, Dave Hardin, head of the Chicago Sunday Evening Club, wrote a statement for television and for his friends recently. Dave has been to the Mayo Clinic, had massive surgery on a tumor on his back. He wrote:

> "After the operation, I experienced a deep feeling of hopelessness and futility. I learned that what I needed was someone to be there for me, not to remind me of how wrong I was to be so depressed and miserable."

And then Dave got off a pretty good homily on our text.

> "Jesus, who spent a great deal of his ministry healing sick people, did not make them feel guilty. He did not tell them to feel differently than they did. He simply asked them whether or not they wanted to get well and whether or not they would trust him. Then he used his wonderful powers to heal."

Dave went on to say that he learned that God was present and had not abandoned him in his darkest hour.

And then, "I'll be off the air for about ten weeks, but I'll be back after that!" which sounds to me like picking up a mat and walking.

It is the faithful response Jesus Christ wants from us . . . Jesus the Christ, God's love to the loveless that they might lovely be, who said to the man waiting for life beside the pool, and to Dave Hardin in his hospital bed, and to you and me:

> "Do you want to be made well? Stand up. Take your mat and walk."

Thanks be to God.